

# Lillian Hellman Walking, Cooking, Writing, Talking

By NORA EPHRON

Lillian Hellman is 67 years old now, and as I arrive at her house on Martha's Vineyard, the new house she built on the beach just

she shared with Dashiell Hammett, she is standing at the door saying she hasn't been feeling well — she has a bronchial infection that worried the doctors because of her emphysema, and the emphysema has weakened her heart, and she has been on antibiotics for the last two weeks and they make her sleepy.

"I'm not used to having anything wrong with me," she said later on. "I'm totally unequipped for getting older. Nobody ever told me I was going to get older. The doctors say I shouldn't smoke, which I go smack on doing. They also say I shouldn't be in a bad climate in winter, but the trouble is, I don't know any warm places I like. I had a great deal of energy when I was younger. Dash used to say very peevishly, 'For Christ's sake, sit down for two minutes and give my eyes a rest.' Now much of that is gone."

There is a cough every so often as she speaks, and she can tick off the things she can no longer do because of her age — she speaks nostalgically about the fishing boat she sold because she could no longer manage it alone; she logs only one work period a day now, instead of two — but it is difficult for anyone who spends time with Lillian Hellman to do anything but take her word for the ill health and loss of energy.

At the end of two days of following her around with a notebook as she tramped down the beach, cooked dinner and talked nonstop, I was exhausted; she, on the other hand, was preparing for a houseful of guests and a weekend full of parties and

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was about to sit down with her secretary to work on a mass of correspondence—there are letters from former students, producers about to stage her play in revival, publishers with requests for reprints. There are business matters dealing with the Hammett estate, which she owns, and with the Dorothy Parker estate, which she worries about.

The new book had just arrived, all black and sleek, and was sitting in a carton on the upstairs landing. "Pentimento," a collection of portraits, is her second memoir; the first, "An Unfinished Woman," was published in 1969 and won the National Book Award. The new book took her just over a year to write, a length of time she seems to feel was too long. "It wasn't difficult," she says by way of explanation. "I'm just slow."

Q: Was "Pentimento" your first title?

A: Yes. I always knew I wanted it. But there was a problem. Most art experts say *pentimenti*, which would have been a mess. I started calling around. The Metropolitan people said *pentimenti*. Other people said *pentimento*. I had to make up my mind as to which one I believed.

Q: You refer frequently in the book to notes and diaries you kept as a child. Did you save all of them?

A: No. Not all. I had a terrible time digging them up. Anyway, I don't have all of them. I have a few years and then nothing for many years. I kept very young girl diaries. It was my way of learning to write. Exercise books. Some are unreadable now — they were in pencil. And I tore up a lot of them. I decided nobody should see them.

Q: In the new book, everyone you write about is dead. Was that a conscious decision?

A: I didn't know it until I was in the middle of writing the book, and then I thought, Oh, my, everybody's dead. But you feel freer that way. Except for interviews, I'm not sure live people should be written about. It's too hard to write about the living. I'm not talking about pulling your punches, that's not it. It's hard to tell

the truth about the living. It's hard even to know it. And you don't want to hurt people out of a blue sky. Although everybody's hurt by everything. One word of reservation and that's all people remember. I'd've never been able to do the Parker portrait [in the first book] if she'd been living. She'd have been pained. We had an elaborately polite relationship — I don't think we ever said an unpleasant thing in all the years.

Q: How did you come to write "An Unfinished Woman"?

A: It was *faute de mieux*, that book. I decided I didn't want to write for the theater, so what was I to do? I didn't want to do an autobiography—that would have been too pretentious for me. I had a lot of magazine pieces I'd done that hadn't been reprinted, and I started to rewrite them. But I didn't like them. I thought, maybe now I can do better with the same memories.

Q: I wondered why you've never really written about the McCarthy period and the blacklist.

A: I tried it this time, and a number of times. I never can say what I mean. I tried in this book to say it in the theater piece. I wasn't shocked in the way so many people were. I was more shocked by the people on my side, the intellectuals and liberals and pretend-radicals—and that's very hard to explain. I'm not really saying it right even now. I mean, I wasn't as shocked by McCarthy as by the people who took no stand at all. Many of them now think of themselves as anti-McCarthy when they weren't. If they say they were anti-McCarthy, what they mean is they were anti-Joe McCarthy himself, not what he represented. I don't remember one large figure coming to anybody's aid. It's funny. Bitter funny. Black funny. And so often something else — in the case of Clifford Odets, for example, heartbreaking funny. I supposed I've come out frightened, thoroughly frightened of liberals. Most radicals of the time were comic but the liberals were frightening.

Q: In the new book, the chapter

on your cousin Bethe is extremely romantic about you and Hammett. I wondered why you had never married.

A: In writing about it I suppose I've forgotten many of the bad times we had. I think it was my stubbornness that kept us together. We did have two periods of planning to be married. The first time he disappeared with another lady. That's not really fair—I was disappearing too. We were not faithful to each other at that time — we were different generations, but we were both of that nutty time that believed that alliances could stand up against other people. I should have known better because I had a jealous nature.

Q: Yes. There's an episode in "Pentimento" where you destroy an entire soda fountain in his house because he was with someone else.

A: Well, he deserved that. One of the reasons we didn't get married the second time was that he was drinking so heavily those years. I was frightened. After a time we never spoke about marriage. It was just as well. I don't think either one of us had natures that were certain of the future. Dash to the end of his life never had any certainty about anybody and never had any ill feeling about it. He'd made up his mind that there was no certainty in any form anywhere and he totally accepted that. I've never seen anyone else who did that.

Two months before he died, the doctor said he had to go to the hospital. We sent for an ambulance. They came to the house and put him on a stretcher. I put on my hat and coat and was holding the door, when he looked up and saw me. "Oh, are you coming with me?" he asked. I really think if he had not been sick I would have put a knife through him. He was surprised that I would come in an ambulance with him, surprised that life had turned out as pleasant as it had. It was shocking to me. "What's the matter?" he said. "I'm very angry with you for thinking I wouldn't come," I said. He said, "Don't be angry. I only meant

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# Lillian Hellman

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it's nice of you." Nice of me—after all those years. He had a remarkable nature. Maybe it was what made it possible for him to go to jail without too much pain.

**Q:** What is the status of the Hammett estate?

**A:** I own it. Arthur Cowan [a lawyer who is the subject of one of the portraits in "Pentimento"] arranged it. The estate went up for auction because of the Internal Revenue Department—they wouldn't allow him a nickel after he went to jail, and they garnisheed everything he earned. That didn't come to enough so the estate had to be auctioned. I didn't think I could afford it, so Cowan said, very kindly, never mind, I'll buy it. He bought half and I bought half, and after Cowan's death his share came to me. Hammett's books do well. I like that. Bertolucci is doing "Red Harvest"—that worries me. I guard what he wrote as carefully as I can, but I'm really violating what Hammett wanted. He didn't want to see the short stories published again. That was just the sickness, I think. And I think that he thought 'til his dying day that he was going to publish new, different, better stuff.

**Q:** And the Parker estate?

**A:** It's a bad story. She left everything to Martin Luther King, and on his death it was to go to the N.A.A.C.P. It's one thing to have real feeling for black people, but to have the kind of blind sentimentality about the N.A.A.C.P., a group so conservative that even many blacks now don't have any respect for, is something else. She must have been drunk when she did it. I was executor, as you know. When King died, it turned out I was no longer executor—everything passed to the N.A.A.C.P., of course. I was so stupid that I assumed I would be executor of the estate until I died. Now the N.A.A.C.P. has sold the rights to all her work for a Broadway musical. Poor Dottie.

**Q:** What do you read now?

**A:** I read a fair amount of poetry. I've come to like biography and poetry and letters almost best. I don't read any novels any more, I'm sorry to say. A writer should read novels. When I do I go back to the ones I've read before. Stendhal. Dickens. Balzac. Melville. I teach Melville, but there's not much response among this generation. I find now when I go to get a book off the shelf I pick something I've read be-

fore, as if I didn't dare to try anything new.

**Q:** Ever since "The Children's Hour" opened, you've been called a woman playwright and a woman writer. How do you feel about that?

**A:** Irritated.

**Q:** What do you think of the women's movement?

**A:** Of course I believe in women's liberation, but it seems to make very little sense in the way it's going. Until women can earn their own living, there's no point in talking about brassieres and lesbianism. While I agree with women's liberation and ecology and all the other good liberal causes, I think at this minute they're diversionary—they keep your eye off the problems implicit in our capitalist society. As a matter of fact, they're implicit in socialist society, too, I guess. It's very hard for women, hard to get along, to support themselves, to live with some self-respect. And in fairness, women have often made it hard for other women. I think some men give more than women give. The world seems so sharply divided into people who get so much for giving nothing and those who get nothing and give so much. Dashiell Hammett used to say I had the meanest jealousy of all. I had no jealousy of work, no jealousy of money. I was just jealous of women who took advantage of men, because I didn't know how to do it.

**Q:** Do you ever worry about what will happen to your work or your papers after you die, or worry that someone will write a bad book about you?

**A:** I've worried a great deal because I've stopped biographies of Hammett. I was not able to stop that awful biography of Dottie. But in the end, you can't stop biographies, and maybe the best thing is to leave as little as possible. I hope I can bring myself to destroy all of it. But in any case, I hope I've protected myself by choosing a few friends who will fight for me. It's a silly point, because what do you give a damn when you're dead. Any life can be made to look a mess of. Mine certainly can. ■

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## Author's Query

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I would be grateful for any information about superstitions in the theater, ballet, opera or movies. I am interested in first-night rituals, lucky mascots and especially the bad luck traditionally associated with "Macbeth."

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